

CONFLICT

How to Preempt Team Conflict

by Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux

FROM THE JUNE 2016 ISSUE

Team conflict can add value or destroy it. Good conflict fosters respectful debate and yields mutually agreed-upon solutions that are often far superior to those first offered. Bad conflict occurs when team members simply can't get past their differences, killing productivity and stifling innovation. Disparate opinions aren't the root of the problem, however. Most destructive conflict stems from something deeper: a perceived incompatibility in the way various team members operate due to any number of factors, including personality, industry, race, gender, and age. The conventional approach to working through such conflict is to respond to clashes as they arise or wait until there is clear evidence of a problem before addressing it. But these approaches routinely fail because they allow frustrations to build for too long, making it difficult to reset negative impressions and restore trust.

In our 25 years of researching team dynamics, coaching teams in *Fortune* 500 corporations, and teaching thousands of executives at Duke University, London Business School, and IMD, we've found that a proactive approach is much more effective. When you surface differences before a team starts work—even when the group seems homogeneous and harmonious—you can preempt destructive conflict.

We have developed and tested a methodology that focuses on five areas: how people look, act, speak, think, and feel. Team leaders facilitate a series of 20- to 30-minute conversations, encouraging members to express their preferences and expectations in each area, identify the most likely areas of misalignment or friction, and come up with suggestions for how those with differing expectations can work together. Through the nonjudgmental exchange of ideas and feedback, teams establish a foundation of trust and understanding and are able to set ground rules for effective collaboration.

Though setting aside time for these conversations up front might seem onerous, we've found that it's a worthwhile investment for any team—new or old, C-suite or frontline—that will be collaborating on significant work for an extended period of time. Leaders need no special training to facilitate the discussions. Indeed, we've found that managers can master these conflict-prevention skills far more easily than those required for conflict resolution.

Five Conversations

Because the five conversations we propose go so far beyond typical “getting to know you” chitchat, it's important to kick them off properly. First, although this may seem obvious, make sure to include everyone on the team and explain why you're initiating the discussions. You might say something like: “Working on a team means collaborating with people whose approaches may differ from your own. Let's explore these differences now, while the pressure is off, so that they don't catch us by surprise and generate unproductive conflict at an inopportune moment.” Explain that the focus of the discussions will be on the *process* of work rather than the *content*.

As the facilitator, make sure that people are comfortable sharing at their own pace and coach them on how to ask clarifying, nonjudgmental questions of one another. Encourage everyone to begin statements with “In my world...” and questions with “In your world...?” This phrasing, borrowed from organizational behavior scholar Edgar Schein, reinforces the idea that underlying sources of

differences are irrelevant. What does matter is the attitudes and behaviors expressed as a result of each person's cumulative personal and professional experience. For example, the fact that you are assertive may be related to your personality, gender, or culture, but the only thing your colleagues need to know is that you tend to vocalize your opinions in plain terms.

We unconsciously respond to cues in how people look, move, and dress.

Team members are likely to be hesitant as you begin, so ease everyone into the process by volunteering to share first. Once the dialogue gains steam, let others guide (but not dominate) it. Eventually, people will move from superficial disclosures to deeper discussion. As they listen to the responses of others and offer their own, they will develop not only a better understanding of their colleagues but also greater self-awareness.

The five topics can be addressed in any order; however, we've found the sequence presented here to be the most logical, especially with new teams, because we perceive first how others look and then how they speak and act. Only after observing them for a longer period can we infer how they think or feel. That said, facilitators should not get hung up on the categories, because there is inevitable overlap. Likewise, if participants struggle with the "In my world" language, it can be tweaked.

Let's now consider the five categories in turn.

Look: Spotting the Difference

Colleagues routinely make fast judgments (especially negative ones) about the character, competence, or status of their peers on the basis of the briefest exposure—what Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal, in research conducted at Harvard, called "thin slices" of behavior. These reactions are often triggered by differences in the way people present themselves. We unconsciously respond to cues in how they look, move, and dress, in their tone of voice, and in what they say about themselves.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

“In your world...

...what makes a good first impression? A bad one?

...what do you notice first about others (dress, speech, demeanor)?

...what does that make you think about them (rigid, pushy, lazy)?

...what intangible credentials do you value (education, experience, connections)?

...how do you perceive status differences?”

The goal of this conversation is to help team members reflect on how they intend to come across to others—and how they actually do. A good place to begin is a discussion about the drivers of status in team members’ respective “worlds.” For example, some people put a premium on job-related characteristics, such as experience, connections, and functional background. For others, status is linked to demographic cues such as age, gender, nationality, and education. Team members can quickly put colleagues off by emphasizing the wrong credentials, adopting an unsuitable

persona, or even dressing inappropriately for the culture. One executive from the “buttoned-up” banking sector faced this type of conflict when he joined an advertising group. In a team discussion, one of his colleagues told him, “The norm here is business casual. So by wearing a suit and tie at all times, it’s like you think you’re special, and that creates distance.”

A similar situation arose at a heavy-engineering company when a female designer joined its board. Her colorful clothing and introductory comments, which included two literary references, made her pragmatic peers think she valued style over substance, which set her up to be marginalized.

An example that highlights the value of discussing perceptions up front comes from a global food group, where a leadership-development rotation of promising young executives had been creating resentment among older subsidiary executives, most notably in the Australian operation. The local team had developed a dysfunctional “keep your head down” attitude and simply tolerated each ambitious MBA until he or she moved on. But when one incoming manager engaged his team in the five conversations at the start of his term, he was able to dispel their negative preconceptions and develop far-more-productive relationships than his predecessors had.

Act: Misjudging Behavior

On diverse teams, clashing behavioral norms are common sources of trouble. Seemingly trivial gestures can have a disproportionate impact, aggravating stereotypes, alienating people, and disrupting communication flows.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

“In your world...

...how important are punctuality and time limits?

...are there consequences of being late or missing deadlines?

...what is a comfortable physical distance for interacting in the workplace?

...should people volunteer for assignments or wait to be nominated?

...what group behaviors are valued (helping others, not complaining)?”

Physical boundaries are often a problem area. Consider the media firestorm that retired French soccer player Thierry Henry set off when, as a TV pundit reacting to surprising breaking news, he touched the thigh of his male English colleague. French culture accepts that sort of interaction, but for television studio colleagues in the macho world of British football, it was a step too far. Or consider the introverted, high-anxiety executive we worked with whose warm and gregarious peer made him uncomfortable: Their expectations for the proper distance at which to interact differed starkly. “I was taking a coffee with him at one of those standing tables,” he remembers. “We literally shuffled round the table as he moved

toward me and I tried to reestablish my buffer zone.”

Attitudes about time can stir up conflict, too. People differ widely—even within the same firm or department—with regard to the importance of being punctual and respectful of other people’s schedules. More broadly, the value of keeping projects on pace and hitting milestone deadlines may be paramount to some, whereas others may value flexibility and the ability to nimbly respond as circumstances unfold. An example comes from a Nordic industrial machinery company that had recurrent tensions in the top team. The non-Nordic executives in the group were deeply frustrated by what they saw as a lack of urgency shown by their Nordic colleagues, and they responded with brusqueness—which, of course, upset their peers. Eventually, the group discussed the situation and set new rules of engagement. But a preemptive conversation would have saved them all a great deal of time and energy.

Differing attitudes about the importance of deadlines often stir up conflict.

Differing levels of assertiveness between team members can present problems as well. Male executives, for example, or people from individualistic corporate and national cultures, often feel quite comfortable volunteering for special assignments or nominating themselves to take on additional responsibilities because they consider it a sign of commitment, competence, and self-confidence. But others may see those actions as blatant, undignified, and shallow self-promotion. Expectations for how much colleagues should help one another, as opposed to contributing individually to the group effort, can also vary widely. For example, a team of software engineers ran into problems when it became clear that some members were very selective in giving aid to peers, while others did so whenever asked. Those who spent more time helping others understandably began to feel resentful and disadvantaged, since doing so often interfered with their own work. It's important to establish team norms around all these behaviors up front to avoid unnecessary antagonism.

Speak: Dividing by Language

Communication styles have many dimensions—the words people choose to express themselves, tolerance for candor, humor, pauses and interruptions, and so on—and the possibilities for misunderstanding are endless.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

“In your world...

...is a promise an aspiration or a guarantee?

...which is most important: directness or harmony?

How to Prevent Team Conflict
...are irony and sarcasm appreciated?

...do interruptions signal interest or rudeness?

...does silence mean reflection or disengagement?

Teams made up of people with different native languages present significant challenges in this area. But even when everyone is fluent in a particular language, there may be deep differences in how individuals express themselves. For example, depending on context, culture, and other factors, “yes” can mean “maybe” or “let’s try it” or even “no way.” At a European software firm we worked with, two executives were at each other’s throats over what one of them called “broken promises.” Discussion

...should dissenting views be aired in public or discussed off-line?

...is unsolicited feedback welcome?"

revealed that words one had interpreted as a firm commitment were merely aspirational to his counterpart.

Sometimes even laudable organizational goals can engender troublesome communication dynamics: For example, corporations that promote a culture of positivity may end up with employees who are reluctant or afraid to challenge or criticize. As the marketing director of a fast-moving consumer goods firm told us: "You're not supposed to be negative about people's ideas. What's going through the back of your mind is 'I can't see this working.' But what comes out of your mouth is 'Yeah, that's great.'"

When teams discuss at the outset how much candor is appropriate, they can establish clear guidelines about speaking up or pushing back on others. At a German investment bank, a top team that had been dominated by several assertive consultants adopted a "four sentence" rule—a cutoff for each person's contributions in meetings—as a way to encourage taking turns and give more-reserved members a chance to contribute. At Heineken USA, board members use little toy horses that sit on the conference table to accomplish the same goal: If you're talking and someone tips one over, you know you're beating a dead horse and it's time to move on.

Think: Occupying Different Mindsets

Perhaps the biggest source of conflict on teams stems from the way in which members think about the work they're doing. Their varied personalities and experiences make them alert to varying signals and cause them to take different approaches to problem solving and decision making. This can result in their working at cross-purposes. As one executive with a U.S. apparel company noted: "There is often tension between the ready-fire-aim types on our team and the more analytical colleagues."

QUESTIONS TO ASK

How to Preempt Team Conflict

"In your world...

...is uncertainty viewed as a threat or an opportunity?

We found this dynamic in a new-product team at a Dutch consumer goods company. Members' cognitive styles differed greatly, particularly with regard to methodical versus intuitive thinking. Once aware of the problem, the project manager initiated discussions about ways to rotate

...what's more important: the big picture or the details?

...is it better to be reliable or flexible?

...what is the attitude toward failure?

...how do people tolerate deviations from the plan?"

leadership of the project, matching team needs to mindsets. During the more creative and conceptual phases, the free-thinkers would be in charge, while analytical and detail-oriented members would take over evaluation, organization, and implementation activities. All members came to understand the value of the different approaches.

Teams also need to find alignment on tolerance for risk and shifting priorities. A striking example comes from a biotech team made up of scientists and executives. By virtue of their training, the scientists embraced experimentation, accepted failure as part of the discovery process, and valued the continued pursuit of breakthroughs, regardless of time horizon or potential for commercial applications. That mindset jarred their MBA-trained peers, who sought predictability in results and preferred to kill projects that failed to meet expectations. To bridge those differences, a facilitator used role play to help the two groups better understand each other's perspective.

Feel: Charting Emotionals

Team members may differ widely in the intensity of their feelings, how they convey passion in a group, and the way they manage their emotions in the face of disagreement or conflict.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

"In your world...

...what emotions (positive and negative) are acceptable and unacceptable to display in a business context?

...how do people express anger or enthusiasm?"

How to Preempt Team Conflict.

...how would you react if you were

enjoyed with a teammate (with silence, emotions—especially overt displays of anger—can be upsetting or intimidating.

body language, humor, through a third party)?"

Sometimes enthusiasm can overwhelm peers or fuel skepticism. An extroverted CMO at a logistics company we worked with assumed that the more passion she showed for her ideas, the more responsive the group would be to them. But her "rah-rah" approach was too much for the introverted, pragmatic CEO. She would start picking apart proposals whenever the CMO got excited. At the other extreme, strong negative

Negative feelings can be a sensitive issue to broach, so it's helpful to start by talking about the kind of context team members are used to. From there, the discussion can get more personal. For example, in one conversation we facilitated at a construction company, an executive told his colleagues that “yelling was common” in his previous workplace—but that it was a habit he wanted to correct. He told us that he had made this disclosure to “keep [him]self honest” in pursuit of that goal.

Early discussions should touch on not only the risks of venting but also the danger of bottling things up. The tendency to signal irritation or discontent indirectly—through withdrawal, sarcasm, and privately complaining about one another—can be just as destructive as volatile outbursts and intimidation. It's important to address the causes of disengagement directly, through open inquiry and debate, and come up with ways to disagree productively.

The benefits of anticipating and heading off conflict before it becomes destructive are immense. We've found that they include greater participation, improved creativity, and, ultimately, smarter decision making. As one manager put it: “We still disagree, but there's less bad blood and a genuine sense of valuing each other's contributions.”

A version of this article appeared in the June 2016 issue (pp.78–83) of *Harvard Business Review*.

Ginka Toegel is a professor of organizational behavior and leadership at IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Jean-Louis Barsoux is a senior research fellow at IMD.

This article is about **CONFLICT**

 FOLLOW UP WITH TEAM **CONFLICT**

Related Topics: [DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS](#) | [LEADING TEAMS](#) | [COLLABORATION](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment



POST

4 COMMENTS

Daniel Savage 2 months ago

Fantastic, practical article. Too much business coaching deals with senior/junior relationships, but as organizations have become so flat that what's really needed is this type of peer-to-peer work.

REPLY

1  0 

▼ [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.

How to Preempt Team Conflict